11/18/62 Matt 12:38-45

TEACHER, SHOW US A SIGN

I think it rather amazing that after 2,000 years of history we can pick up the BIble and find words that speak directly to the modern situation. Across the centuries, from one culture, totally different from our own, come words and ideas that hit us where we live. Written by peasant fisherman, uneducated tax gatherers their message could very well have come from contemporary cultural analysts. I find this especially true in our scripture lesson this morning. In it are raised two problems that are a definite part of our way of life. The first is the traditional human need of proof. ("Seeing is believing") is one of the by-words of our civilization; we simply don't like anything that cannot be proven. Underlying this of course is the larger question what is truth?--How do we really know what is true?--We will come back to this one later. The second major problem, directly related to the first is the inevitable tendency of man to substitute inferior but proveable beliefs for truth that is above proving. This is the story of man's religious self expression over the past 100 years. We don't like anything that cannot be proven; and when religion falls in that category we discard it, conciously or we unconciously substituting something more material and tangible, something we can see and feel, something like our children's blankets

which will give us real security and comfort when all else fails.

In the twelfth chapter of Matthew, Jesus is being interrogated, taunted and questioned by a group of Pharisees. They have asked him on what ground does he break the sabbath by healing; and further by whose power and on whose authority does he perform these acts of healing. Before the questions have even left their lips, some of their number have given answer to them saying that his power and authority are of Beelzebub, the prince of the devils. These were those who piously prayed for the Messiah, but who were repelled by the humble man who claimed the title. But there must have been others in that group who wanted to believe Jesus, who found themselves attracted by his blunt truth and tender mercies. And it would have been this faction that asked Jesus for a sign. It was a rabbinical custom that a student in question had the right of asking for a sign; some concrete proof that the teaching was legitimate and true. And so it was perfectly normal that they should say ("Teacher, show us a sign.") The desire here expressed is not unlike that which we all harbor in our hearts. We want to believe in God; we truly want to be thoroughly Christian; but it would be a lot easier if we had some proof.

Jesus' reply to their request is a flat denial. His response to them is one of the few occasions where Jesus delivers a scathing verbal attack on his opponents. He called them a brood of vipers; an evil and aldulterous generation; a generation so bent on piety and keeping the law that they were blinded to the truth in their midst. The word aldulterous is significant; it could only mean that in thier works of righteousness the Pharisees had been unfaithful to the Lord who is righteousness; and that by even asking for a sign they have committed a grave offense. He had healed a man out of pity and compassion!

now they wantdd him to repeat the miracle to prove himself. These were the same men who would have been first to acclaim our Lord had he jumped from the pinnacle of the temple./ But this he did not and could not do./ He would not use his God given power to prove himself; he knew that if he did the skeptics would still be suspicious and endlessly repeat their trite request.

In his harsh response Jesus ruled out forever, the possibility that he might perform mighty acts that men might be impressed and believe in him./He pointed to two historical incidents where truth was accepted at face value./Jonah went to Ninevah preaching repentence; he had no credentials, as far as we know he performed no signs, nor miracles; but the people of Ninevah repented./ The Queen of Sheba had heard of King Solomon's great widdom; and instead of asking for proof, or a display of power she was satisfied just to be with the great man. These wre people of the past who had ears to hear and yees (eyes) to see; they were people who recognized and accepted the turth without having it demonstrated to them./Jesus lamented that his generation was not so wide-eyed and open hearted. If only they would accdpt the truth at face value. Jesus concluded both illustrations by noting that something greater than either Jonah or Solomon was here.

The question and problem we are left with having contemplated the passage is this ("What is truth? How can it be proven?") This is the question that is every bit as relevant today as it was twenty centuries ago. Civilization has advanced 100 fold; but within man there is still the beloved idiom ("seeing is believing.") But can truth ever be proven? Can we ever submit the Ultimate to categories of measurerment we have concocted? There is the little story of a college freshmen who had just returned for his first weekend home. His school was famous for its atmosphere of intellectual superiority. His mother, on seeing her son asked ("How are you Freddy?") The astute reply was ("Relative to ~~what~~ what?") The point of the story is that ultimately we can/t say how we are; we are ~~fine~~, healthy, comfortable, only in relation to a standard of health and comfort we, ourselves have established. Now this is truly a pure academic problem, and it can be left to the classroom. But as we live out our lives professing beliefs in God, the ultimate, we must sooner or later come to grips with it. Temporally we can define truth, and prove it by means of formulas and equation. Ultimately it cannot be done. This was the amazing discovery of Albert Einstein in the field of physics and mathematics, a discovery that has been known to men of God throughout history.

We live, however, in a cultural environment, that denies this philo phical and theological maxim; for we are the heirs of the age of science. / Every aspect of life as been reduced to equation; no area of existence is immune to the vulgarity of the polltakers' statistics. We like life to be clear and well defined, we want answers to all our questions. // The principle that is the guiding light of the advertising industry is that the American consumer will buy anything that bears the approval of laboratory science. / I think we are all a little weary of t.v.'s ever abundance of white coated salesmen, beakers and test tubes in hand. / Nathan Scott, Prof. of Rel. and Lit. at U of C. brilliantly summarized this modern dilemmna. ("A peek at a young married couple today reveals the extent to which we have gone in depending on science for our values; both material and moral. / In thier driveway sits an ugly foriegn car; road tests have proven it to be more economical. Their gleaming house is filled with scientific gadgetry guaranteed healthier and safer. / On thier hearth gleams the senile pink light of artificial fire; burning wood is too dirty. / In the bedroom their new baby nurses from a bottle filled with a liguid vastly superior to that which nature has supplied. / Smoking filter cigarettes, because science

has assured them they will live five years longer that way, they are religiously studying and discussing their favorite literature--Hamlet? Paradise Lost? A modern novel? No indeed, Lo and behold it is @Consumers Report." In this house science reigns; "synthetic," "proven," "laboratory tested," these are the gods. Of humanity there is none.

In this atmosphere we profess belief in a God who is undefinable; and call Jesus Christ our Lord who bluntly and harshly refused to be proven. Of course the inevitable has happened. Religion has fallen prey to the scientific method. Modern America wants a religion that has results. Modern Christians want their faith to lavish them with security, inspiration, and clean living. Our culture has given rise to Norman Vincent Peale's positive thinking substitute for faith. At any book store you can find countless testimonies of how Christianity is good business. The Golden Rule has become the standard for fair labor practices and an automatic assurance of business success. We have successfully made Christianity into another equation in our scienfific way of life. Do the prescribed acts, mouth the prescribed creeds, go the right places, and like a celestial computor religion will spew forth the answers to every problem.

The point of Jesus harangue agains the Pharisees was that God cannot be proven. That even if one were so inclined to try, the existence of God cannot be determined by any amount of proof. Likewise Christianity cannot be submitted to a scientific test. We simply have no right, as the Pharisees did not, to ask our Lord for a sign. To ask for proof is to blaspheme against the God who is the ultimate, the first cause. the God who is his own proof.

How really is truth proven? It can't be proven. How do you prove light. Certainly not by equations or physical principals. The impact of light is its own proof, no amount of scientific jargon can explain it away when it is present; nor can science prove the existence of light to one who cannot see it.

So it is with Christianity. Jesus Christ cannot be proven to a person who wills not to believe. His power and presence are real and meaningful to us, not when we involve ourselvesin the intellectual gymnastics of tryin go establish that presence and power. Jesus Christ is his own proof, his own evidence. Our response must be not in terms of idle questions but in terms of commitment and faith.

A few years ago, it was fashionable in the academic world, to be a hard-headed critic of anything that fell outside the bounds of

material things, rational equations and logic./ Naturally imaginative literature and poetry suffered very badly at the hands of these cirtics./ If a writer described the heights of ecstacy of a man in love; or the depths of grief of a man who has lost a loved one, his writing, regardless of its beauty, was called nonsense./ Against this T.S. Eliot, a poet and critique in his own right spoke,/ In one memorable sentence he summarized the defense of unrpovable truth by saying "a poem is a poem and not another thing." A poem can't be measured by a mathematical formula. A poem that touches on human emotion, that describes an aspect of life that can/t be boiled down into an equation is simply not up for grabs./ Time magazine in an attempt to give words of description to a recent performance of Rosalind Russel; finally gave up with the statement, "Roz is a Roz is a Roz is a Roz." If you will excuse the irreverent analogy this is precisely the Christian approach to Jesus Christ./ We come to him not with equations and formula, not with demands for proof--but in faith.

Although this sermon has two points; the two are so closely related that I cannot say this is where the second one begins. Recall that after Jesus refused the Pharisees he told a very strange parable. It is a parable that describes the spritiual state of a man who

demands proof; and who therefore substitutes that which can be proven for that which is above proof. A man had rid himself of an evil spirit. The house, or his body, was clean and swept and empty. The vanguished spirit roams for a while and then returns to find his old place of residence still unoccupied. In his glee he gathers seven other evil spirits and they quickly invade the house causing it to be much worse than it was originally.

Once again in the context of 1st century mythology we hear words that apply directly to our situation. How many times have we witnessed this very thing happen in the world of political power struggles? At the end of W.W.I Germany was rid of Kaiserism, the myth of Aryan culture dominating the globe was crushed; Prussioan Militarism had been soundly defeated; indeed it was a clean house; Germany was rid of its evil spirit. But the house was not empty long; into the gap rushed Hitler with the seven devils of anti-semitism, Arryan superiority, scientific contempt for life and so on. No one would disagree that Germany was seven times worse than before. Without too much trouble the very same analogy could be made with the situation in Cuba.

What is true politically, in this case, is true spiritually. It is a fact that under normal conditions a vacuum cannot exist; air

will rush in to fill the emptied space. We have cleansed our lives of all superstition, of all false science. We have replaced them with technical proveability and scientific accuracy. And in so doing we have put all our eggs in one basket--the basket of proven data, facts and figures. In doing this we have all but eliminated the possibility that our lives will be touched by the God who is Spirit and whose existence will not be fitted into our categories of truth.

One of the most beloved pieces of prose in the English language is Joyce Kilmer's "A Tree." Scientifically his description of a tree doesn't hold much water and yet would anyone with eyes deny its truth? He is not denying the truth of the bilogical description of a tree--but he is affirming that biology is limited that there is something greater here.

The irony underlying the problem I have been addressing this morning is this. Most men of science don't think the way I have been describing. Very few scientifstsclaim that their discipline hold the keys to all truth and understanding. On the contrary science has led most of its servants to an awareness that there is something greater here; that every scientific advance is only more evidence to the God who is above even science. ~~itle, the writings of [illegible] scientist~~ ~~culture, are the ones to have been deceived~~

When Moses encountered God in the burning bush, he asked God who he should say had sent him./ And then we hear a strange anser. ("Tell them I am Who I am sent you.") God cannot be explained; he is, because he is./ This must be our approach to him through Jesus Christ; it must be an approach in faith./ Faith is not unreasonable it is above reason./ Jeuss Christ cannot be measured and described scientifically and logically--for he is the Lord science and Logic. Let us heed the lesson of the Pharisees. Let us not spend our time asking for a sign; let us not be blinded to the truth which is among us.